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Queer paths toward home: Kinship in speculative fiction

Abstract: Queer(ed) families – typically framed through terms such as Found Family, Chosen Family, or Family of Choice – are more often formed by agency and voluntary participation than they are by legal or genetic connections. For the purposes of this paper, kin will be defined by affect, behavior, and declaration. The three fictional texts – *Are You Listening?* by Tillie Walden, *Life of Melody* by Mari Costa, and *I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself* by Marisa Crane – will serve as a basis to illustrate how kinship is defined, particularly in queer speculative narratives. Speculative fiction allows for particular metaphors of power. These metaphors often tie into agency because the kin unit is chosen even through (or perhaps especially through) hardships and tension. Ultimately, found family and queer kinship revolve around the idea of empowerment. Specifically, this is a kind of empowerment marked by agency and choice without the enforcement of domination or cruel hierarchies. Marginalized characters have the opportunity to try and regain control, to shape their own lives/paths in a world that feels like it is not made for them to survive, nonetheless thrive.

Keywords: Found family; Speculative fiction; Kinship; Power; Agency.

> To fill the vacant roles in their lives, some characters build their own families with people they choose to care about.
>
> «Family of Choice», TV Tropes

> Those words, Family and Home, are so seductive, especially when we put Chosen in front of it. But they're not simple. Not simple at all. It's heroic. Not heartwarming.
>
> Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Dirty River*

Defining Kinship

How are we related?

We might ask this question in any number of ways – in terms of our relationship to nature, our relationship to those who share our DNA, our relationship to those in various communities we're a part of, or our relationship to those who share our social identities in some way, shape, or form. One of the most basic units of relation in a heteronormative world is

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the white middle-class nuclear family, often portrayed as related through blood, shared living arrangements, and shared patrilineal surname.

Queer(ed) families, however – typically framed through terms such as Found Family, Chosen Family, or Family of Choice – are more often formed by agency and voluntary participation than they are by legal or genetic connections. Elizabeth Freeman writes in "Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory," that «Defined more loosely as the set of possibilities for social relations in any given culture whether they are addressed by state policy or not, kinship has also mattered to people of all sexual orientations whose emotional, financial, domestic, and other ties do not follow the lines of dyadic sexual union and genealogical descent» (2007: 295). Donna Haraway writes in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* that «The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present. Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places» (2016: 1). Ulrika Dahl brings these concepts together in "Not Gay as in Happy, but Queer as in Fuck You" her focus on «studying how queers understand and make family and futurity at the intersection of utopian imaginaries, legal regulations, and ordinary everyday life» (2014: 144). Legal regulations can sanction queer families, or they can make queer families taboo[1]. Queer people cannot – and do not – however, wait for the sanction of the state to declare their ability to have a family, both in regards to biological children and aside from them. Queer folks reach out to and declare kin in «ordinary everyday life».

But there is also the space of "utopian imaginaries". Imagination is necessary to reconstruct the family unit – or a more expansive notion of kin – beyond the heteronormalized nuclear family. But imagination is also a space of fiction and storytelling. Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish discuss «the radical imagination», which necessitates a new way of thinking and telling the stories of the past, the present, and the future. Robinou's ideas in *Queer Communal Kinship Now!* align with this approach, wherein they write that

> I conceive of kinship as a trigger for the imagination, an invitation to contemplate, individually and collectively, the shapes that our future social formations

[1] One example of many: in Italy, lesbian mothers began to lose rights in 2023 as the names of non-biological parents began to be removed from birth certificates.

> might take. Imagining what sorts of bonds we would like to experiment with in non-patriarchal, denaturalized, sensitive, and ethical approaches is the self-reflexive process needed to avoid repeating the mistakes perpetuated by the internalized model of 'the family.' In that sense, the simple semantic gesture of swapping family for kinship in these interrogations already allows one to proceed in such an exercise with a slightly expanded freedom of thought. (2023: 135-136)

This essay will trace how the imaginary mode of speculative storytelling examines kinship in three specific example texts. *Are You Listening?* by Tillie Walden follows two queer characters – Lou and Bea – as they leave their hometown to escape reminders of past traumas. In *Life of Melody* by Mari Costa, beast Bon and fairy Razzmatazz reluctantly work together to raise a baby who they name Melody. In *I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself* by Mac Crane, Kris must navigate grief of losing her wife, Beau, in childbirth as she raises their child in a dystopia where the 'justice' system adds shadows to people deemed criminals.

For the purposes of this essay, *kin* will be defined by affect, behavior, and declaration. The three fictional texts will serve as a basis to illustrate how kinship is defined, particularly in queer speculative narratives. The emotional realm of this categorization (the affective) relies in these particular texts on intimacy – sometimes sexual, sometimes platonic[2] – and on love – again, sometimes romantic, sometimes platonic. The behavioral often includes some measure of ensured safety and/or protection. It is important to keep in mind, as Robinou writes, that

> José Esteban Muñoz (2009) [...] wrote that 'queer aesthetics map future social relations' (1). Indeed, it is important to see *queer as a performative force*, since it is *not only a being but a doing for and toward the future* – queer as ideality, a political horizon. Presently, as an epistemology that poses for its founding axiom that people intrinsically differ, and identities are never static, queer

[2] Megan Cole writes about «amatonormativity, a concept developed by Elizabeth Brake to describe 'the assumptions that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship types.' Amatonormativity is harmful to everyone: queer folks, single adults (by choice and otherwise), and even those within traditional family units, who find that these idealized relationships are incapable of fulfilling the entirety of an individual's social, emotional, and physical needs. One of the central harms of amatonormativity is its marginalization of other kinds of relationships, relationships that might contribute to increasing justice, equity, and well-being. One such relationship structure is queer platonic relationship...» (270-271).

> theory brings up appreciated complications to the categories of 'family,' 'child,' 'woman/man,' and 'motherhood/ fatherhood.' Queer kinship does not require these old, binary, naturalized, fixed identity positions, even though it has to, and joyfully does, deal with the ways in which they are inscribed in western culture. (2023: 82, emphasis mine)

And finally, the declarative will usually involve some form of self-identification/self-categorization as a part of a particular kin unit. In outlining this particular method of working toward kinship, it is possible to see the construction of home as a queer act of resistance. Jack Halberstam writes about «a model of queerness that is not simply about what kinds of bodies have sex with what kinds of bodies, but about different life narratives, different ways of being in relation to others, different notions of occupying space… we might privilege friendship networks over extended families when assessing the structures of intimacy that sustain queer lives» (2016: 369).

The three texts have been particularly chosen not only for their representations of queer found family, but also because of their generic categories. Speculative fiction allows for metaphors of power in particular ways. In *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility,* Alexis Lothian invites the reader «to ask what imagined futures mean for those away from whom futurity is distributed: oppressed populations and deviant individuals, who are denied access to the future by dominant imaginaries, but who work against oppression by dreaming of new possibility» (2018: 4-5). In fact, Lothian goes so far as to argue that «Radical queer politics has been seen as a potential way out of the normativities imposed by the capitalist, neoliberal political economy of dominant Western (particularly American) culture. Queer theory began as a way to imaginatively activate new or emergent ways of life through intellectual work, through writing or teaching as well as philosophizing» (6). The choice to focus on speculative fiction here also plays into agency – *chosen* family, family who is chosen even through (or perhaps especially through) hardships and tension, and this can be contrasted in some ways with biological families. The stakes can be raised by the presence of magic and science fiction, and heightened stakes – such as life-or-death situations – can clarify for readers what the stakes can be for queer folks in real life. This makes that which queer people stand to lose more tangible.

Affective

In *Are You Listening?, Life of Melody, and I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself,* the emotional bonds of kinship are primarily demonstrated in three ways: 1) affectionate intimacy; 2) bonding/shared experiences, and 3) feelings of love. Robinou writes that «the study of kinship consists of asking simple questions unconditioned by our specific cultural perspective: how are basic relations of intimacy and needs organized through time and space? What are their variations and possibilities?» (2023: 130) While affectionate intimacy can certainly be sexual in nature, its «variations and possibilities» can also be platonic. Sara Ahmed makes the argument that «for some queers, at least, homes are already rather queer spaces, and they are full of the potential to experience the joy of deviant desires… To queer homes is also to expose how… the intimacy of the home is what connects the home to other, more public, spaces» (176)[3]. As a general concept, the creation of the queer(ed) home is part of what crafts this sense of kinship. The home can be a literal shared space[4], but it need not be.

Affectionate intimacy can manifest physically through «codified loving gestures» (Freeman 2007: 307). While cultural narratives surrounding queer culture tend toward oversexualization, it is important to recognize and give appropriate weight to platonic manifestations of this intimacy as well. Queering, after all, allows for many possibilities as a resistance to the idea that there is only one way to be, become, or belong in the world. In *Are You Listening?*, for instance, Walden often uses illustrations to speak to intimacy without verbal components, but this intimacy between protagonists Lou and Bea is never fraught with sexual tension. Given the context surrounding the situation – their age difference, Bea's history with sexual abuse, and the general nature of their relationship – this maintenance of a nonsexual companionship paired with intimacy in their interactions is vital to the progression of the plot, as well as to the stakes of the story. Often this intimacy is expressed through embracing. Lou also ruffles Bea's hair multiple times, defining their relationship as more akin to siblings

3 As will be analyzed more deeply in the discussion of the behavioral (and specifically of *I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself)*, the intimacy of the home is not necessarily maintained when an authoritarian society is at play, instead making that typically private space a public one.

4 In *Are You Listening?* this shared space of the home is the car that they occupy together for the ride, though this is eventually removed. The families of choice in *I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself* and *Life of Melody* are more traditional in the appearance of houses as the shared space, though *I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself* additionally extends the family beyond this particular confine.

than to anything romantic in nature. Similarly, Lou teases Bea about finding a girlfriend.

On the other hand, *Life of Melody* plays more with sexual tension, though it never has sex as an on-the-page aspect of the narrative. Generally, the romantic nature of their intimacy becomes more apparent as the graphic novel wears on. There are some similar notes in Bon and Razzmatazz's relationship as there are in Lou and Bea's, such as relying on teasing to build and demonstrate intimacy. For example, Bon and Razzmatazz make fun of each other's ideas for names for their adopted daughter Melody (Costa 2018: 27), and Bon makes fun of Razzmatazz's name more than once. At one point, when Razzmatazz is experiencing a kind of magical illness and Bon comes to pick him up from work, Razzmatazz demands of Bon «What're you doin' here? Books are for smart people» (83). Later, Bon laughs at Razzmatazz's attempts at ice skating (98).

However, these moments of potentially platonic light-hearted teasing are paired with moments of tension in several ways[5]. In part, the tension comes from the fact that they are in a Fake Dating relationship to the extreme – namely, pretending to be the married parents of Melody. There are also moments of romantic/sexual tension, such as when Bon is pretending he'll suck Razz's blood and ultimately ends up on top of him post-ice-skating, which causes them to be embarrassed when someone happens upon them (114-115). At the end of the narrative and in its epilogue, there is much embracing/kissing, to the point where their daughter Melody gets embarrassed by the displays of affection from her parents and leaves the room.

The most overt sexual tension of these examples is present in *I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself*. Certainly, there is physical affection that is non-sexual in nature throughout the novel, such as any physical affection with the protagonist's child, Bear. However, there is narrative time devoted to Kris reflecting on kink classes with her dead wife; in fact, a sexual encounter wherein Kris accidentally hurts her wife causes Kris to get her extra shadow, assigned by the government in lieu of keeping people in prisons. In this way, the overtly sexual affection becomes inextricable from the bigoted authoritarian attitudes toward queer people in general. In the main

5 There is an Enemies-to-Lovers-style romance at the heart of this, so some of the tensions are more serious than others.

timeline of the plot, the sexual affection between Kris and her new girlfriend Michelle is one way that they bond and create trust.

Emotional ties are often formed through bonding and shared experiences. Robinou writes about «kinship as a term that signifies a conscious coalition centered on relations of care and attention. This is, for example, the case with the phenomenon of 'chosen families,' or affinity-based families, as kinship formations generally structured around shared affections and worldviews» (2023: 130), later adding the consideration of «kinship as a bonding story, or narrative of belonging, and what this produces in the material constitution of sociality» (139). In *Life of Melody,* the bonding often occurs through traditional milestone moments[6], such as when Melody starts talking, or through other family-fun-coded[7] experiences, such as ice skating together.

Shared social identities can also cause bonding and shared experiences (whether those experiences were actually had together or those experiences were of a similar vein but not literally the same). In *Life of Melody,* tension often arises from the difference in the two protagonists' social identities as a fairy and a troll variant/beast. In *Are You Listening?* and *I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself,* however, shared social identities are part of what weaves together and solidifies bonds of kinship. *Are You Listening?* has Lou and Bea bonding over their shared gay identities as women from the same small town. Pavithra Prasad writes in "In a Minor Key: Queer Kinship in Times of Grief" about how «Queer identity binds us in various configurations of kinship because this kind of family helps us survive daily microaggressions, dismissals, or invalidation by hegemonic institutions. This kind of kinship tries to divert the inevitability of minoritarian struggle» (2020: 116).

The stakes are especially heightened for the marginalized in *I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself*, which uses the speculative elements – the magical ability to give people more shadows as punishment paired with the

6 These moments follow a sense of chrononormativity. As Lothian writes, «Chrononormativity weaves all who can follow its tempo into the fabric of dominant culture, making them part of the production and reproduction of social life and of capital» (11). The example of kinship that *Life of Melody* provides can be problematized as homonormative, «a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption» (Duggan 2002: 179).

7 In *Life of Melody,* such 'family fun' adheres to more traditional and expected experiences as a family unit.

more-overtly-authoritarian-than-the-present government – to demonstrate those stakes. Early in Kris' narration, she makes clear to the reader that «Everybody knows [the Department of Balance is] homophobic, racist, transphobic, ableist, xenophobic, sexist, all the goddamn phobics and ists» (Crane 2023: 3-4), and later her daughter, Bear, echoes this when she says «The wrong people have all the power» (244). As members of oppressed groups, the centralized characters in Crane's narrative have particular insight into the oppressive systems and the corruption of power. This allows them to bond closer to one another for many reasons (including survival), while also forwarding the worldbuilding and plot-driven elements at the same time. Even the process of selecting who is sought out for inclusion in this queer kin unit often involves some sort of shared social identity. For example, Kris, her dead wife Beau, and her new girlfriend Michelle all queer women. One of Bear's closest friends, Eve, is trans, as well as a shadester[8] like Bear and Kris. They are united in resistance against a society that has deemed them dangerous just as much as they are bound by softer affections such as love. It could be argued that this way of forming kin is to some degree about theoretical kinship – bonds of similarity in the face of oppression – just as it is also about attachments to specific people.

The first 'rule' of what makes a family – and perhaps the most universal 'rule' – is love. Again, this is something that could be romantic, but could also be platonic, and both of these forms of love could also be queer(ed). This is present in all three texts, and demonstrated in various ways as is examined throughout this essay. However, it would feel incomplete to conclude a section on the affective bonds of queer kinship without at least mentioning it once overtly. In *I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself,* Kris tells another shadester a reason that she's been able to live on with her extra shadow meant to shame her: «I can think of at least five people who love me, shadow or no shadow» (273). Love is a key piece of how these queer people can continue on in otherwise tumultuous lives and conditions.

Behavioral

Queer kinship relies strongly on feeling, but this is not the sole way in which these ties are formed. Feeling is related – often if not always – to action, and so it is important to pay attention to how the behavior of queer

8 A "shadester" is the word they use for someone with extra shadows.

kinship is represented in fiction, perhaps both as something mimetic of the real world as well as something aspirational. Freeman writes that «kinship is a set of acts that may or may not follow the officially recognized lines of alliance and descent, and that in any case take precedence over the latter in everyday life» (2007: 305). Feelings can be stronger than «officially recognized lines of alliance and descent,» but so, too, can actions. Robinou similarly states that «A kinship system is not a structure but a practice, a praxis, a method, and even a strategy (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 147). Therefore, my attempt is to articulate *queer communal kinship as a new praxis of family*» (2023: 80, emphasis mine). Behavior can cause a person to think that they are not wanted in a family; on the other side of the coin, behavior can prove a kind of emotional dedication that, when put into action, tightens kinship bonds.

One of the easiest ways to create a home (in a physical dwelling or otherwise) is to provide a space of safety and protection. This is especially vital in found families that are formed when marginalized people are excluded from polite society writ large, and/or when marginalized people are excluded from their biological/genetic family units. As Robinou argues, «For a post-family agenda, 'making kin' means to put forth something deeper than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy and proceed in such a way by bonding in accordance to ethical considerations. Kinship is a call to make our structures of care and attention ethically accountable» (2023: 130). If a biological family rejects or otherwise harms a marginalized person – such as a queer child – then one of the priorities that queer person is likely to have when seeking out a new, more trustworthy kin is a place of safety – i.e. what the family of origin couldn't (or wouldn't) provide. This safety, then, forms a home where kinship can develop.

In *Are You Listening?* it is perhaps most obvious, especially at first, that Lou and Bea are running *away* from home. But they are both seeking as well, propelling themselves *toward* something to heal, even if they can't initially articulate what they're searching for. This absence of a home is unmistakable on the page when they are trying to return their temporarily-adopted cat, Diamond, to her home. When they arrive at the address, the home is missing, reflecting nothing but a door frame, a dead tree, and an empty field (Walden 2019: 165). Because of the death of Lou's mother and the abuse that Bea suffered in her family, this stands in as a visual metaphor for their relationships with home when they set out on the road

together. They almost coincidentally (or at least incidentally) form a kin unit between the three of them. Lou, in the mentorship/older sibling-style role, tells Bea when they're being chased by mysterious men, «I'm not gonna let anything happen to you» (185). Bea, in turn, helps Diamond after a car wreck, promising her help.

When Bea eventually finds Diamond's owner – heavily implied to be Bea's dead mother – she is told that «Everyone, every*thing* has potential for magic. You just gotta be standing somewhere in the world and in the body that lets you see it» (254). It is this tenet that allows Lou and Bea to finally find what they are looking for. This environment of safety is voiced when Bea has to say goodbye to Diamond, expressing how «She made me feel really safe, which I know is strange to say after everything…» (276). Even though each of the members of this chosen family goes their separate ways at the end of the graphic novel, it is impossible to ignore the connection that lingers whether they are in one another's physical presence or not. With one another, they found the safety they always needed.

This concept is similarly echoed in *I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself,* when Michelle tells Kris «You're safe here» (Crane 2023: 223). This reassurance is deeply necessary because of the world they live in. But the reassurance is also more specifically necessary because of the healing that Kris still desperately needs in the wake of her wife's death, as well as in the wake of her becoming a shadester. Prasad writes that

> the intimate caring labor of queer kinship… rescues us from institutional sicknesses. It is ironic that the necessary labors of love that render us melancholic, also keep us bound in solidarity and kinship. Queer melancholia is thus an invitation into kinship. In queer kinships, grief is shared not just in the moment of mourning, but deeply felt as a lasting melancholic bond forged under shared duress. (2020: 116)

While Michelle's words may seem to pale in comparison to other possible behaviors, her speaking the promise is a high-stakes commitment. The government has violated the boundaries of home, legalizing 24/7 surveillance not only outside of the home in the public sphere, but also inside of the home in the private sphere. Michelle's words not only create a space of safe expression between the two women, but also fortifies that space in defiance of the government oppressing them. This is yet another instance where the speculative elements' raising of stakes brings what everyday queer people

face to the forefront. Michelle backs this sentiment of safety up with not only words, but also action, such as in helping Kris to raise Bear.

Other chosen kin in the novel also similarly provide protection. When Bear is suspended at one point, she explains that it's because a boy «and his friends were threatening me and Eve on the playground,» (Crane 2023: 261) which can be a result of their shadester status just as much as it can be a result of Eve's trans identity or their identities as girls. Kris responds by saying «This is the part where I'm supposed to say no fighting… I'm happy you defended yourself and Eve» (*ibid.*). Kris recognizes the value of marginalized chosen families protecting each other in this way; she knows that they cannot rely on those in positions of authority to protect them.

An environment of safety and protection can also be kindled by acts of support. This can be support in terms of child-rearing, such as is the case with *Life of Melody* and *I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself.* In *Life of Melody,* each of the two adults provides both domestic and financial support; Razzmatazz gets a job at the library and Bon gets a job at the daycare. In *Are You Listening?* support often occurs in terms of the temporary queer mentorship. For instance, Lou instigates several lessons teaching Bea how to drive. Lou also offers 'guidance' in how to find a girlfriend (Walden 2019: 110). Bea, in turn, learns to trust Lou enough not only to come out, but also to tell Lou about being raped by her cousin.

Declarative

Naming can be a way to declare a family member as one of your own. It can also be a bonding experience for those doing the naming, especially since it requires both collaboration and compromise to be done effectively. Lou and Bea name Diamond; her 'true' or original name is never revealed. And in *Life of Melody,* it takes a long time for Bon and Razzmatazz to settle on a name for her. They know her birth name, though it is never revealed to the reader, and the only thing that Bon and Razzmatazz can agree on at first is that they both hate that given name. Razzmatazz demands to know why Bon's name selections are «all onomatopoeias» and Bon wants to know why Razzmatazz's are «all frou-frou and stuff» (to which Razzmatazz replies «THEY'RE CUTE‼»; Costa 2018: 27). They eventually each come to Melody as her name «because it's, like, cute and flowery, but also, like, a sound» (55). Naming holds a place of importance in families, but also in

queer community. Naming one's self can be a part of any number of queer experiences, including but not limited to transitioning from a gender (and name) assigned at birth. Later in *Life of Melody*, Razzmatazz distinguishes «the humans who made her» from Melody's parents: «We're her parents, Bon» (111).

In *I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself,* there are some blood relations (Kris and her dad, Beau and Beau's mother and Bear). Others come into the found family through queer romance (Kris and Beau, Beau and Michelle, and Kris and Michelle), others have simply adopted one another as kin (as Dune and Julian do for Kris, Michelle, and Bear). Toward the end of the novel, Kris has a realization: «Finally, I think I've got it all figured out: there is space for all of us here» (Crane 2023: 300). They take the whole found family (except for Kris' dad) and escape to Beau's mom's place in the country, a place where they can no longer be shamed or watched at all times by the government. They find an escape from oppression not only through one another, but also *with* one another, driving in the end toward a new home of their own choosing, one with a mix of blood kin and chosen kin alike.

Conclusion

Robinou writes that

> *Queer* is about desire (not only sexuality): the force of *becoming-other. Communal* is about practice (not only theory), about doing: the performative machine of our conceptual apparatus, the potency to iterate change. *Kinship* is the process of iteration itself: the focus of an extended political project that takes over the family institution and counteracts the limited scope of short-termist political formations. Queer is utopian, communal is pre-figurative, and kinship is (re)productive. Queer should be used as a mindset, communal as a method, and kinship as a focus. Queer opens (difference), communal generates (pragmatism), kinship activates (imagination). (2023: 147)

Ultimately, found family and queer kinship come around to the idea of empowerment. Specifically, this is a kind of empowerment marked by agency and choice without the enforcement of domination or cruel hierarchies, something which the family in *I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself* foils in the authoritarian government. In the world of *Are You Listening?* everything is magic. In the town that they travel to, the place manifests from its inhabitants. For Lou and Bea, this means that it is a place that holds all the complexities of home. Marginalized characters have the opportunity to try

and regain control, to shape their own lives/paths in a world that feels like it is not made for them to survive, nonetheless thrive.

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